

Immediate Release

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SOAMES: ACTION NEEDED TO SAVE OUR POST OFFICES

Nicholas Soames MP this week urged action to safeguard the county's remaining Post Offices and protect vital community facilities. The call comes as 1,000 sub-postmasters marched on Parliament on 18 October protesting at Post Office closures.

Under the current Labour Government, a quarter of the Post Office network has already closed and more cuts are expected as a result of Labour's plans to abolish the Post Office Card Account in 2010. Branches across the country also face threats from the cancellation of rural Post Office subsidy in 2008; the direct payment of benefits; DVLA moves to renew car tax online and the opening of new regional Passport Offices.

Royal Mail bosses have even suggested that the Post Office network could be reduced to just 4,000 branches. Since 1999, Mid Sussex has already lost 7 branches.

In response, Conservatives have launched an Action Plan to save local Post Offices:

- Giving Sub-Post Offices greater freedoms to offer a wider range of commercial products.
- Pushing for more Post Offices to be 'one stop shops' for central government services.
- Campaigning to save the Post Office Card Account from being axed.
- Encouraging local councils to consider opening 'council counters' in local branches.

Nicholas Soames explained; "I recently undertook a survey amongst the Postmasters in my constituency and the underlying message is that Post Offices are the lifeblood of the local community but their future is now under real threat. The Government needs to understand the importance of their valuable social role and Labour must end the damaging uncertainty over the future of the network.

“I want to add my support to the Action Plan unveiled by David Cameron, to give sub-Post Offices greater freedoms to diversify, to provide more central and local government services through branches, and to campaign to save the Post Office Card Account.

“I hope this will put pressure on the Government to develop a clear long-term strategy for Post Office, to help support our local branches and preserve these vital community institutions.”

Notes

An estimated 4,000 Post Offices have closed under the current Government. The Labour Government’s Post Office Minister recently told Parliament, “the reality is that too many offices are chasing too few customers to be viable... Having too many branches with too few customers is clearly the root of the problem across much of the network” (Jim Fitzpatrick MP, *Hansard*, 16 October, Col. 618)

The Chief Executive of Royal Mail has even said that he wants to reduce the Post Office network from 14,500 to just 4,000 Post Offices (*The Times*, 19 May 2006). The overwhelming majority of remaining the Post Office network are sub-post offices run by private businessmen and women.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2-2187445,00.html>

CONSERVATIVE ACTION PLAN

1. Giving Sub-Post Offices greater freedoms to offer services

Conservatives would rewrite Sub-Postmasters’ contracts, allowing them to provide a greater range of products and services, including private mail services.

- The long-term future of the network will be best secured if the Post Office is opened up to new markets and new customers.
- Just as many pubs that were tied to one brewery are now free houses, so Post Offices should be released from their ties and made able to offer a broader range of services.

2. Using Post Offices as ‘one stop shops’

Conservatives will investigate a scheme whereby people who have concerns about a range of Government services can use their local Post Office as a kind of ‘Government GP’. Trained staff in Post Offices could then advise on a range of matters, including tax returns, pension entitlements, the opening hours of local pharmacies, how to apply for a disabled parking badge, and the like.

- The Government has looked at this idea on a number of occasions. There have been a number of plans and pilot schemes aimed at using Post Offices as a ‘one stop shop’ for accessing a wide range of information and services from Government and related bodies.

- Despite their good intentions the Government have achieved little more on this than a small handful of pilot projects.

3. Campaigning to save the Post Office Card Account

Conservatives are calling on the Government to review their decision to abolish the Post Office card account. This scheme is hugely important to those people who do not have bank accounts and around one million of our most vulnerable people cannot get a bank account. The account is also a vital source of revenue for Post Offices.

- If the Government choose to replace it only with a limited, targeted scheme it may help those without bank accounts, but the financial cost to Post Offices will still be great.
- If such a process is already in action by the time a new Government comes to power, we will not be able to reverse it. However we believe that the solution is not to abolish the account and that is why we have been calling on the Government to review their decision.